

David Woodfill

[East Valley Tribune](#)

United Way officials broke the seal on a new "store" chock full of free stuff for foster children and the families that raise them.

The grand opening of Helen's Hope Chest in Mesa, a program dedicated to providing clothes, books and school supplies to children in need, drew city officials and other dignitaries, including a few big guns from Arizona's political scene - House speaker Kirk Adams, R-Mesa; U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, a Democrat whose district includes part of the East Valley; and U.S. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz.

Helen's Hope Chest, which was named after former foster child Helen Paula Simmons, took over a former city Housing Administration office at University Drive and Pasadena.

All of the work to refurbish the building came from volunteers from United Way, Mesa Rotary Club, The Boeing Co. and other groups. It's set up like a store with rooms full of clothing separated by sex and age group.

"It was important to us that these kids were able to come in and get the clothes and the things that we have in a manner that was very respectful and that made them feel cared for," said Carol McCormack, Mesa United Way president.

Officials said the program will be an important resource for families with foster children in light of cuts to state-dedicated funding.

"As a state legislator and as a leader down at the state Capitol I can't begin to tell you the many sleepless nights that we had with the agonizing choices and decisions that we must make as we deal with the monumental state budget crises," Adams said. "How grateful we are

that there are citizens and individuals who are willing to take in these children, because we need the help. We need the help of the citizens of Arizona to provide protection and safety for these kids."

McCain said in different times, the city or state may have been able to fund the project and praised the people and groups who banded together to make Helen's Hope Chest a reality.

"Maybe in different times we would not have had to count on these wonderful volunteers, but the reality is now," he said.

Simmons, the program's namesake, was born during the Great Depression when she and her brother were turned over to a Catholic hospital in New York before going to live with a family in Queens. She later lived in the Valley.

Despite spending the majority of her childhood in foster care, she went on to get married and raise two children - Debbie Jacobus, an office manager for McCain, and Regena Field of Jackson, Wyo.

Both children were on hand for Saturday's opening.

"She was a beautiful mother because she really cherished us and was not willing to give us up the way her mother did," Field said.

Jacobus and Field said their mother, who died in 2009, would have loved the new center that bears her name.